

Guatemala

Response to Information Request Number:	GTM00002.ZSF
Date:	25 January 2000
Subject:	Guatemala: The situation facing the disabled, particularly persons with speech and hearing loss
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, D.C.
Keywords:	Guatemala / Disabilities / Disabled persons

Query:

Would a deaf mute individual with no family support be able to provide for him or herself in Guatemala? Would such an individual be likely to become homeless?

Response:

The following response was provided by Inforpress Centroamericana, a news and analysis service based in Guatemala City.

In general, the Guatemalan State does not provide services for the disabled population. Public infrastructure (sidewalks, buildings, parks, etc.) does not take into account the special requirements of this population as to access and mobility. Nor are there social programs for supporting the disabled population. As a result of this situation, it is common to witness persons with hearing and speech loss, paraplegics, blind persons, or other disabled Guatemalans begging for money on the streets, in the buses and in restaurants, often placing themselves in degrading situations or at risk of physical harm in traffic while soliciting for subsistence income.

During 1996, civil society sectors initiated campaigns to bring attention to a number of social issues, largely motivated by the political space created by the peace negotiations between the government and the revolutionary forces (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), that finalized late that year. One of the results of these campaigns was law 135-96, which takes into account attention, development, training, participation and the exercise of rights in relation to disabled persons, addressing as well issues of equal opportunity and the elimination of all forms of discrimination.

In spite of this advance, up until now, no budget has been assigned to implement programs for this segment of the population. According to one source working with the Guatemalan Committee in Favor of the Blind and Deaf, 7-8 persons per 1,000 population suffer from deafness and/or speech loss. These figures, reportedly from the World Health Organization (WHO), when projected to the total population signify that there are 70,000 to 80,000 persons with hearing and/or speech loss. Inforpress spoke with the national office of the WHO, but the person interviewed could not confirm the figures. [The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reported in *Health in the Americas 1998*, Vol. II that "0.7% of the Guatemalan population has some form of disability -- physical in 60% of the cases, sensory in 36%, and mental in 3.1%. By sex 58% of the disabled were males, 42% were females" [\[www.paho.org\]](http://www.paho.org).

As part of law 135-96 the government created the National Council for Attention to the Disabled (CONADI -- *Consejo Nacional para la Atención de las personas con*

Discapacidad). Serving on the council are delegates from the public sector and civil society, including the universities. CONADI is currently working to pass enabling legislation, that would include a budget assignment and concrete commitments for carrying out the law's stipulations. "Meanwhile, civil society organizations are left to resolve the problem created by the absence of government resources," comments Sebastián Toledo, representative of the blind population in CONADI. In general, the disabled population receives no state services, leaving a void filled by non-governmental organizations, families, communities and the survival instincts of the disabled population.

NGOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) specialized in assisting the disabled are limited in number. The population with economic resources attends private centers, such as APROSA and the Helen Keller Center in Guatemala City, which assist small groups of disabled persons. The fact that most Guatemalans lack funds for transportation, materials and quotas, severely limits the explicit demand for such services, although demand clearly exceeds the services available. None of the sources consulted know of NGO services in the rural areas that specialize in assistance for persons with physical disabilities.

Most assistance for the deaf population is provided by the Guatemalan National Committee for the Blind and Deaf, which is an autonomous, non-profit entity, which sustains itself with income from the National Lottery Santa Lucia. The sale of lottery tickets is largely managed by blind and speech-impaired persons. The income from the lottery is complemented by donations from the business community and private donors. The organization also receives supplies and equipment from international entities.

The National Committee provides services for 1,123 deaf-mutes, including 725 in the capital city. Recently the committee opened three centers in the rural departments of Zacapa, Retalhuleu and Quetzaltenango, three communities of the 330 municipalities that exist in Guatemala. These centers are used by the beneficiary population that lives too far from the capital city for regular travel. The National Committee is the largest organization in the country, and the only one that provides low-cost service.

The Guatemalan National Committee for the Blind and Deaf includes the Rodolfo Robles Hospital and four centers in the capital city that provide rehabilitation, vocational training and educational preparation, with pre-school programs, primary and high-school education, and vocational training. The students are taught by the National Institute for technical training (INTECAP). There also exists an employment office, which assists with the employment process from searching for companies willing to hire disabled to providing advice regarding labor rights. Nevertheless, the potential for employment for the disabled is extremely limited, given the high rates of unemployment in the country, which make it extremely difficult for the disabled to compete for jobs. Advocates for the disabled population also argue that there exists a tendency among employers to offer the disabled jobs at salaries below the established minimum wage (Juan Antonio Pineda, Director of the Guatemalan National Committee for the Blind and Deaf).

The situation facing the disabled population is difficult, given the limited resources and services available from the National Committee, and the fact that the State shows no signs of interest in providing concrete solutions to its problems. Public and private buildings lack conditions that facilitate access, government offices do not provide interpreters, there is a general lack of signs, signals or written indications available for the hearing impaired. There is a general lack of promotion, outreach, and publicity of rights for the disabled in the field of education, work, health, physical infrastructure, transportation, etc.

Although the 1996 law provides the legal framework for these kinds of changes, there are numerous obstacles that require responses. One of CONADI's current priorities is to work to ensure that the law is complied with.

Communities

Inforpress found no evidence that rural or urban communities have adapted their services, installations or infrastructure to the needs of this population.

Families

Most of the special attention available to this population comes from their families, and the level of care in part depends on the economic capacity of the families, and their willingness to maintain the person. Frequently deaf persons seek income by begging in buses and restaurants, often selling decals or candies, or simply handing out cards that state their disability and ask for help. Although Guatemala, as with many Latin countries, has a strong social fabric, with community support and extended families, the gravity of the economic situation, in which 80% of the population lives in poverty, exerts a powerful dehumanizing pressure on families, especially affecting the non-productive population.

Private schools and rehab centers.

Private schools and rehabilitation centers exist, but they do not cover the latent demand, and the costs of such programs far exceed the economic capacity of most of the population. The lack of attention on the part of the State and the limited number of NGOs involved in this area make it impossible to quantify the unmet demand in Guatemala. Most persons with hearing/speech loss are unaware of the few private services available.

Urban versus rural environment

What few social services that do exist in Guatemala tend to be within or near the capital city. Difficulties regarding access to these services are far greater for the deaf-mute population from rural Guatemala, especially given the fact that an important part of the Guatemalan population does not speak Spanish, given the fact that 48% of the population is indigenous, and that within this population there are 21 distinct language groups. Adding to this is the fact that 55% of the rural population lives on less than US\$1 a day, and of that budget, families spend 1% on education (1998-99 National Family Income and Expenditure Survey). For these families, 52% of their budget is used to cover food needs. The capacity to finance special education or training is extremely limited.

In general, health care is precarious. According to United Nations offices such as the Economic Commission for Latin America, and the UN Development Program, national per capital annual health expenditures averages US\$25. This data provides the general context of extreme deficiency of health services. Given this context, even less can be expected for the special needs population.

Employment discrimination

In the Guatemalan countryside, 55% of the population lives on less than US\$1 a day. Country-wide that figure is 33%. Of that population, only 1% of the family budget is spent on education. In general, formal employment opportunities are lacking, and work in the informal sector provides income below the poverty line. According to the United Nations, 80% of the population lives in poverty. Given these precarious conditions that affect the productive population, the resources available for those with physical disabilities are extremely scarce. This situation leaves most of this population in a state of dependency or underemployed in menial jobs. The absence of vocational training programs and campaigns creating awareness regarding the disabled population exacerbates this exclusion. These factors leave the disabled population vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation in the workplace.

Persons interviewed:

Sebastián Toledo. Representative of the disabled population before the National Council for Attention to the Disabled Population (*Consejo Nacional para la Atención de las*

personas con Discapacidad -- CONADI).

Juan Antonio Pineda. President of the Committee for the Blind and Deaf of Guatemala (*Comité Pro Ciegos y Sordomudos de Guatemala*).

Julietta Rodas. Social Worker in the Hearing Department of the Rodolfo Robles Hospital in Guatemala City.

Representative of the Regional Office of the World Health Organization.

Additional information available to the INS Resource Information Center (RIC), is consistent with the research conducted by Inforpress. William Godnick of the Monterey Institute of International Studies reported the following:

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

Inforpress Centroamericana. *The Situation Facing Disabled Guatemalans with an Emphasis on Persons with Speech and Hearing Loss* (Guatemala City: 7 November 1999), 4 p.

Godnick, William H. *Victimas o Sobrevivientes? Dealing with the Public Health Consequences of Firearm Violence in Guatemala* (Monterey Institute of International Studies) [Internet] www.prepcom.org/documents/ngo [Accessed 9 July 1999]

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